Facebook: An Authentic Tool for Social Communication
or a Dangerous Medium of Isolation?

Magdalena Poweska

As I sit down to write this paper, I cannot help but notice that my Facebook page is open, albeit in a minimized window within the background workings of my laptop. The seeming need to be connected to an online social network is so automatic, that it has almost become second in nature. Having an online presence – an online identity for that matter - fulfills a need so strong, that to be pulled away or disconnected becomes almost daunting to envision. This attachment to the artifact of Facebook provides grounds for discussing the topic of the use of media of social communications as a tool for the authentic betterment and progress of people and communities. By consulting a variety of scholarly sources on the topic, I will argue that while the use of Facebook and other similar mediums for communication can facilitate human discourse and enrich relationships, the non-conscious need for self-gratification is what ultimately attaches people to online social networking sites such as Facebook. Although some may say that self-gratification is an integral human need that must be fulfilled, such an approach to social media may indirectly result in an individual’s isolation. Thus, this neglects the ethical principle of what the Church teaches media should be: a contribution to authentic human development, which allows individuals to be true to their transcendent destiny.¹

The Church recognizes that the modern experience of the world is grounded in a digital reality. It acknowledges that “to a considerable extent, human experience itself is an experience of the media.”² In spite of this, various passages from Church documents reveal that mediums of social communication, and more specifically, the Internet, are simply instruments and tools for

human communication. They are morally-neutral; that is, by themselves, they are neither good nor bad. What has ethical consequences for the development of persons, however, is how people choose to use these various means of social communication. The underlying fundamental ethical principle which is the end and the measure of how various media of social communication are used is “the human person and the human community.” In other words, media of social communications should be evaluated on how they live up to the betterment and progress of peoples and communities.

One of the most widespread and popular media of social communications in society is Facebook. Statistics from a study pertaining to Facebook in 2014 show that as of March 2014, 1.28 billion users were active on the site each month, and of this number, at least 802 million logged onto the website daily. A review of a wide selection of scholarly source material suggests that people cite the maintenance of social relationships as the key reason for their use of Facebook. As one study points out in particular, users make use of Facebook to develop, maintain, and establish relationships, as well as use the platform for existing interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, social networks such as Facebook are positive venues for social connectedness and sharing identities. Without a doubt, there are positive outcomes of using Facebook; by providing a venue for human communication and facilitating relationships between individuals or groups of peoples, Facebook fulfills the ethical task of bringing people together and enriching their lives.
However necessary social connectedness may be to humanity, it does not explain the addictive power of Facebook. In other words, people seem to get fairly attached to the medium of communication - Facebook itself - rather than the actual process of communicating with others. Academic literature on the topic proposes that there are in fact underlying, non-conscious motivations of self-gratification which drive such a commonly widespread attachment to Facebook among its users. In their article “Self-Affirmation Underlies Facebook use,” Toma and Hancock argue that the popularity of sites like Facebook “can be understood through the fulfillment of ego needs.”\(^9\) In the context of Facebook, one’s ego-needs can be affirmed by “crafting self-presentations that reveal core aspects of their self-concept, such as social affiliations and treasured characteristics, and highlighting social connection with family and friends, which satisfy fundamental ego needs regarding desired self-image. In turn, these ego needs motivate social network use.”\(^10\) Basically, it is plausible that users gravitate towards their Facebook profiles insofar as they elevate and reinforce their perceptions of self-worth and value.\(^11\)

Toma and Hancock, maintain that this phenomenon fulfills psychological needs, and further suggest that browsing on Facebook is a psychologically meaningful activity.\(^12\) Moreover, they conclude that “positive psychological and social outcomes of Facebook use include increased life satisfaction, increased social self-esteem and emotional well-being.”\(^13\) However, it is worth mentioning their brief admission that, “people routinely dismiss, distort or avoid information that threatens their self-worth. Conversely, they value, cultivate, and gravitate

\(^{9}\) Toma and Hancock, 2013, "Self-Affirmation Underlies Facebook use," 321.

\(^{10}\) Ibid.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 321-322.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 327, 328, 329.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 328.
towards information that reinforces it.”\textsuperscript{14} This makes clear that a large part of self-affirmation comes from desirable self-presentation. On its own, that does not seem like a harmful thing. However, when coupled with “technological affordances which allow online communicators to craft optimized, highly desirable self-presentations,”\textsuperscript{15} one cannot help but question the ethical principles involved in receiving self-affirmation from creating an untrue representation of oneself online.

It appears that the Church would also call into question this approach to the use of social communication; in the document entitled \textit{The Church and Internet}, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications explicitly states that, “the Internet is not merely a medium of entertainment and consumer gratification. It is a tool for accomplishing useful work.”\textsuperscript{16} Thus, when Facebook and other media move away from being primarily instruments of social communication and become venues primarily for self-gratification, they raise ethical issues that cannot be justified as simply as satisfying psychological and social needs. When that gratification is built in large part on an untrue representation of self, it leads one to question to what degree this practice of self-affirmation is in actuality contributing to authentic human development. Rather than that, is there a possibility that it is simply providing one with a medium to express their narcissistic tendencies?

Other scholars maintain a far more critical view of the addictive powers of Facebook, and shed light on resulting ethical problems. They also would agree that Facebook has moved beyond being a tool for relationship maintenance and companionship and, instead, has increasingly become a venue for entertainment, passing time or relieving boredom and

\textsuperscript{14} Toma and Hancock, 2013, "Self-Affirmation Underlies Facebook use,” 322.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 322.
\textsuperscript{16} PCSC, \textit{Church and Internet} (2002), The Holy See, accessed November 27, 2015, paragraph 11.
procrastinating.\textsuperscript{17} However, these scholars would also add that a large part of Facebook consumption includes obtaining information about others.\textsuperscript{18} The authors of the article, “Negative social comparison on Facebook and depressive symptoms: Rumination as a mechanism,” argue that Facebook provides the opportunity for individuals to compare themselves to others on characteristics like appearance, popularity and success.\textsuperscript{19} Generally, when people are exposed to information about others, they tend to involve themselves in social comparison and self-evaluation, which consequently can be used to make self-judgments.\textsuperscript{20} This is not entirely problematic insofar as negative social comparison does not lead to negative self-appraisals and exacerbate poor well-being.\textsuperscript{21} The majority of people on Facebook craft their profiles in self-affirming manner, and those who are vulnerable to engaging in negative social comparison have a skewed picture of others to begin with.

Additionally, the aforementioned study found that social comparison on Facebook, rumination and symptoms of depression were all “positively and significantly associated with one another.”\textsuperscript{22} In this case, rumination refers to “repetitively focusing on one’s distress, including its potential causes and consequences.”\textsuperscript{23} Essentially, when individuals ruminate their perceived inferiority to those they view on Facebook, they engage in an emotional regulation practice which has been proven to sustain distress.\textsuperscript{24} Unfortunately, it is often the case that individuals with low psychological well-being will continue to passively focus on their anguish instead of “changing the situation that led to their negative social comparison or switching the

\textsuperscript{17} Ryan, Chester, Reece, & Xenos, “The uses and abuses of Facebook: A review of Facebook addiction,” 133.
\textsuperscript{18} B. A. Feinstein, R Hershberg., V. Bhatia, J. A. Latack, N. Meuwly, & J. Davila, “Negative social comparison on Facebook and depressive symptoms: Rumination as a mechanism,” Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 2.3 (2013): 162.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.,163.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 168.
focus to more positive or rewarding aspects of their environment.”

Once again, it becomes clear that when the use of a tool intended for social communication becomes distorted, negative consequences come as a result and do nothing to uplift or better the individual.

In light of this rather grim consequence of using the site in the wrong way comes a study which suggests that by virtue of how Facebook is structured, it results in emotional consequences for users. In their article, "Facebook’s Emotional Consequences: Why Facebook Causes a Decrease in Mood and Why People Still use it," Sagioglou & Greitemeyer discuss their findings of how an increase in one’s activity on Facebook is subsequently related to negative moods.

Assuming that the majority of activity on Facebook consists of “non-interactive processes or random consumption of social content,” many users end up with a reduced true social capital and even experience feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, this study found that being exposed to information about others, regardless of how truthful or complete it may be, regularly evoked a sense of envy in users. In turn, this had “detrimental effects on life satisfaction.” Thus, where communication purposes of Facebook activity are not being met, but are rather superseded by superficial self-affirming ego needs, Facebook activity has been shown to hamper the overall well-being of users. The article concludes by stating that “although Facebook is an excellent tool for social networking, there are serious disadvantages to using it, such as envy, lowered life satisfaction, reduced satisfaction of basic psychological needs and dampened mood.”

All in all,

25 Feinstein, Hershenberg, Bhatia, Latack, Meuwly, & Davila, “Negative social comparison on Facebook and depressive symptoms: Rumination as a mechanism,” 168.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 359.
this effectively underlines the plethora of ethical issues which arise when this media is used for anything besides what it was intended for: facilitating social communications.

It seems that many of the individual and social problems presented above, which active users of Facebook commonly experience, arise when users replace human communication and interaction by increased use of this platform for social communication and an intense attachment to crafted media profiles (either one’s own or those of others). Albeit to different extents, in all of the cases examined, scholarly studies have shown that such an attachment was harmful to the well-being of the user. I would even argue that the case for the positive fulfilment of self-affirmation and satisfaction of ego needs is flawed, because it replaces authentic human interaction and is based on presentation of self that is somewhat fictitious and incomplete. As the pastoral instruction contained in the Vatican document *Aetatis Novae* points out, “media cannot take the place of immediate personal contact and interaction among family members and friends.”32 This underscores the fact that media like Facebook need to be used in ways which stimulate interpersonal communication, instead of becoming a substitute for it.33

In the document entitled *Ethics in Communication*, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications acknowledges that depending on how media is used, persons can “either grow in sympathy or compassion or become isolated in a narcissistic, self-referential world of stimuli with near narcotic effects.”34 The Church realizes the danger of attachment that media can pose when used for purposes other than authentic communication. Further, the document states that media can be used to block communication and injure the integral good of persons by alienating

---

33 Ibid.
and isolating them, in addition to leading to an increasing self-centredness.\textsuperscript{35} All of the case studies demonstrated this to be a reality on Facebook; while the medium provided users with a seemingly endless social network and platform for communication, many users were alienated from others, either by their own unconscious narcissistic drives or feelings of loneliness. \textit{Ethics in Communication} questions whether the “web of the future will turn out to be a vast, fragmented network of isolated individuals (…) interacting with data instead of with one another?”\textsuperscript{36}

Although it may sound cynical, the emerging scholarly studies exhibit in cases presented within them, that the improper use of Facebook may heed to these predicted outcomes.

Still, the Church assures that social communication has a huge ability to promote human happiness and fulfillment.\textsuperscript{37} In order for this to happen though, one must critically assess any form of media or social communication and ask whether or not, “as a result of it, the human person is becoming truly better, that is to say more mature spiritually, more aware of the dignity of his humanity, more responsible, more open to others, especially the neediest and the weakest, and readier to give and to aid all.”\textsuperscript{38} In as far as media encourages people to be conscious of their dignity and grow in the capacity for dialogue, they are truly instruments which aid in human fulfillment.\textsuperscript{39} Ultimately, at the heart of the issue of ethics in media is how well it can foster authentic human development, rooted in “serving the human person, building up human communication grounded in solidarity, justice and love, and speaking the truth about human life and its final fulfillment in God.”\textsuperscript{40} Therefore, one should strive to move away from an improper use of media of social communications like Facebook, which, the discussion has revealed, is


\textsuperscript{36} PCSC, \textit{Ethics in Communications} (2000), paragraph 29.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 33.
overshadowed by self-centredness. Instead, people should actively strive to use social communications for what they are ultimately meant to facilitate: the development of peoples and groups through authentic communication with one another.

By examining the social communications artifact of Facebook, the discussion in this paper attempted to present the case that, although media can be excellent facilitators of human communication, when they are used in improper ways, they have negative psychological and social consequences. As Church documents confirm, ethical issues arise whenever media replace authentic human relationships and lead to the alienation of individuals. Society’s present media of social communication will always tend towards more harm than good until they utilize greater tools for growth towards authentic fulfillment of humanity. As an avid Facebook user, I can relate my experiences with the findings of the examined studies; at times, browsing through others’ profiles has made me feel less satisfied with my own situation, but, then again, the self-affirming thrill of getting a notification or expanding my social network has kept me hooked for all these years. Analyzing these issues on a deeper level has led me to ethically evaluate my own use of the site and challenge myself to overcome unsatisfactory motives for using it, besides what it is intended to be used for. At the same time, I am reluctant to give up on Facebook altogether, because the Church assures that the benefits of it, and other similar media of social communications, have the potential to be fully realized only once the ethical problems are resolved.\(^4\)

\(^4\) PCSC, *Ethics in Internet*, paragraph 6.
Bibliography


